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AFTER THE STORM

Wilma offers a test of leadership

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The other night I looked up and saw the Milky Way, shimmering brilliantly in the heavens like a thousand or more points of light. Of course, I couldn't see a blessed thing on terra firma -- without a flashlight. This was early Tuesday morning, Oct. 25, only hours after Hurricane Wilma had ravaged South Florida, including my neighborhood. But the heavens that night were magnificent and, for the first time ever in Miami, I could clearly see the Pleiades, Big and Little Dipper and Milky Way.

A lot of things became clear during and after the storm. Political leaders and government officials came into much sharper focus. I saw several up close and personal and came away with newfound respect for some, reaffirmed regard for others and diminished confidence in a few. Here's the report card.

- **Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez.** He has been pretty much a bust in terms of public-policy initiatives in his first year in office, but when it comes to staying cool and providing leadership in a crisis, Alvarez is *the man*. Time and again, the mayor showed solid judgment and an admirable lack of ego as he reassured citizens about the status of relief supplies and emergency services.

And after the TV-hogging Alex Penelas, Alvarez was a welcome change. He shared the podium willingly with some of his political antagonists -- notably, Commission Chairman Joe Martinez. The moment that symbolized just how cool and capable Alvarez is in a crisis came when he climbed into a county helicopter and flew down to Homestead Air Reserve Base to find out why dozens of trucks loaded with ice, water and MREs had not been dispatched. When all about him some were losing their heads, Alvarez was kept his on straight and level.

- **Broward County Mayor Kristin Jacobs.** She doesn't get much respect from her fellow commissioners, although they -- not voters -- choose the county's "mayor." It's a largely ceremonial position with limited powers; he or she is merely the first among equals and presides over commission meetings. Jacobs showed that she's capable of much more as she worked long, productive hours at the Broward E.O.C. and conducted media briefings. She also showed her grit when FEMA and the state couldn't get their trucks to distribution sites in the first day or two after the storm.

- **Gov. Jeb Bush.** He may be best remembered for his emergency-management skills. He's an exceptionally talented leader when it comes to coping with natural disasters -- and there have been so many of them during his tenure. He's cool under pressure and also displays a good deal of grace. I particularly admired his willingness to shoulder the blame for FEMA's initial shortcomings.

- **President Bush.** He came, he saw, he pronounced things OK. It was only slightly better than not coming. "W" threw his arm around the shoulder of some volunteers from Tennessee serving hot meals at a Pompano church and posed for photos with hurricane victims. Isn't it curious that instead of visiting one of the PODs [points of distribution] set up by Broward or Miami-Dade the president instead chose to drop by a faith-based initiative? To his credit, he visited the National Hurricane Center and gave Max Mayfield and his staff well-deserved kudos.

- **Sens. Bill Nelson and Mel Martinez.** They traveled to South Florida together to demonstrate their united support for storm victims and local government. My sources say that in private meetings Nelson was genuinely helpful and attentive and that Martinez was less helpful..

- **U.S. Reps. Mario Díaz-Balart and Robert Wexler.** Perhaps the oddest of all political couples, the conservative Miami Republican and liberal West Palm Beach Democrat sent a joint letter to Big Oil calling it "inexcusable and irresponsible" that their South Florida gas stations don't have generators. In strong language the congressmen suggested that Exxon Mobil, Shell, et al. "work expeditiously to rectify this problem before another disaster strikes." This is the kind of bipartisan collegiality that works well for South Florida.

- **U.S. Rep. Katherine Harris.** When Air Force One disgorged its passengers last Thursday at MIA, who should show up but the presumptive GOP Senate nominee? Harris is from Sarasota, which was untouched by Wilma. So, why was she here except to get a little face time and advance her candidacy? In other words, Harris exploited our tragedy for her political gain. For someone from such a privileged background, this was low rent.

We all owe a special thanks to the men and women of law enforcement in South Florida who did an excellent job directing traffic, keeping the peace and preventing anything like the reported crime wave in New Orleans after Katrina. Thanks, too, to the largely unsung government employees who answered those 311 calls and starting clearing debris from the streets and roadways while it still littered their lawns.

When the going gets tough, the tough often take a beating like everyone else when the foe is as formidable as Wilma. For the most part, our leaders took a licking but kept on ticking.